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POLLUTED PLANT

Companies seek new deal on cleanup

■ Griffith firm likely to remain in business on site of toxic dump, though environmental regulators say capping polluted soil could prove tricky.

BY JOE CARROLL
Times Business Writer

Corporations that polluted the ground under a Griffith chemical plant hope to strike a deal with federal regulators that will cut cleanup costs to one-tenth of what the government originally insisted.

The proposal, which is expected to be released for public comment in late April or early May, also would enable the chemical firm - American Chemical Service, 420 Colfax Ave. - to continue operating, though some modifications of the plant layout may be required, a federal environmental official indicated.

American Chemical executives declined to comment until the new deal is finalized.

The company's 36-acre Colfax Avenue plant was designated a Superfund site by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency seven years ago, after federal regulators discovered thousands of

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gallons of toxic substances had been dumped into the soil between 1955 and 1990, when the firm was a chemical recycler. The company is no longer in the recycling business.

The EPA originally ordered the firms responsible for sending the chemicals to Griffith to pay for the excavation and incineration of the contaminated earth.

But preliminary testing showed such digging and incineration would have posed a threat to the heavy-equipment operators and others working on the job, said Kevin Adler, EPA project manager for the American Chemical Superfund site. The workers likely would have been exposed to dangerous amounts of toxic chemicals if the earth was disturbed and burned, the tests suggested.

In addition, the preliminary tests showed the cleanup plan would have cost \$200 million, far more than any of the polluters said they were able to pay.

"Since then, we've been trying to come to terms," Adler said from the EPA's Chicago office.

The new deal, which calls for installing a 25-foot-

deep underground barrier and building a massive concrete cap over the surface, would cost at least \$20 million, Adler said. Those costs must be paid by the firms that helped pollute the ground by sending chemicals there for recycling, some of which already have contributed millions to a cleanup fund.

The barrier, which is designed to prevent contaminants from bleeding into the water supply and moving farther afield, was installed last summer. Special devices also will be sunk to capture pollutants and release bacteria that eat toxic substances and render them harmless, Adler said.

But what remains to be decided is how large the cap will be and whether it will force American Chemicals to relocate any of its buildings, Adler indicated.

The purpose of the cap is to prevent rainwater and melted snow from trickling down into the contaminated ground and further polluting the water table.

"What we are trying to do is let them continue to operate at the property," Adler said. "The cap will be configured in and around the buildings. It'll be tough."

